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Little Rock Coal Co.

The IRON TRAIL

By REX BEACH

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SYNOPSIS

Murray O'Neil, railroad builder, on his way to Alaska, is a passenger on the Nebraskan. The ship runs aground. O'Neil helps Captain Johnny Brennan to quell a panic among the passengers.

As the ship settles O'Neil is accosted by a beautiful girl, and he plunges overboard with her. They are picked up by Captain Brennan. She proves to be Natalie Gerard, whose mother is the friend of Curtis Gordon, O'Neil's unscrupulous business rival.

O'Neil and Natalie journey to Hope together. She tells him of her mother and Gordon. When they arrive at Hope Gordon meets them.

O'Neil is impressed with the magnetism of his rival, but is sure his plans are unshakable. Tom Slater, quite a Gordon for O'Neil. They go to Cortez in time to save Dan Appleton in a crooked card game.

"Don't do that, son, or you'll wear spurs for the rest of the trip."

"What's the matter with him, anyhow?" Dan inquired. "He was boiling over with enthusiasm all day, but now—why, he's asleep sitting up! He hasn't moved for twenty minutes."

Tom shook his head, dislodging a swarm of mosquitoes.

"Walk on your toes, my boy. Walk on your toes. I smell something cooking, and it ain't supper."

When food was served O'Neil made a pretense of eating, but rose suddenly in the midst of it with the words:

"I'll stretch my legs a bit." His voice was strangely listless. In his eyes was the same abstraction which had troubled Appleton during the afternoon. He left the camp and disappeared up the bank of the stream.

"Nice place to take a walk," the engineer observed. "He'll bog down in half a mile or get lost among the sloughs."

Darkness had settled when O'Neil reappeared. He came plunging out of the brush, drenched, muddy, stained by contact with the thickets, but his former mood had disappeared, and in its place was a harsh, explosive energy.

"Tom," he cried, "you and Appleton and I will leave at daylight. The men will wait here until we get back." His voice was incisive. Its tone forbade question.

The youthful engineer stared at him in dismay, for only his anxiety had triumphed over his fatigue, and daylight was but four hours away. O'Neil noted the expression and said more gently:

"You're tired, Appleton, I know, but in working for me you'll be called upon for extraordinary effort now and then. I may not demand more than an extra hour from you; then again I may demand a week straight without sleep. I'll never ask it unless it's necessary and unless I'm ready to do my share."

"Yes, sir."

"The sacrifice is big, but the pay is bigger. Loyalty is all I require."

"I'm ready now, sir."

"We can't see to travel before dawn. Help Tom load the lightest boat with rations for five days. If we run short we'll 'sawash' it." He kicked off his rubber boots, unspined them to drain the water out, then flung himself upon his bed of boughs and was asleep almost before the two had recovered from their surprise.

"Five days or longer?" Slater said gloomily as he and Dan began their preparations. "And me with indigestion!"

"What does it mean?" queried Appleton.

"It means I'll probably succumb."

"No, no! What's the meaning of this change of plan? I can't understand it."

"You don't need to," Happy Tom informed him curtly. There was a look of solitude in his face as he added: "I wish I'd made him take off his wet clothes before he went to sleep."

"Let's wake him up."

But Slater shook his head. "I'd sooner wake a rattlesnake," said he.

O'Neil roused the members of his expedition while the sky was reddening faintly, for he had a mind which worked like an alarm clock. All except Appleton had worked for him before, and the men accepted his orders to await his return with no appearance of surprise.

With the first clear light he and his two companions set out, rowing up the estuary of the Salmon until the current became too swift to stem in that manner. Then landing, they rigged a "bride" for the skiff, fitted their shoulders to loops in a ninety foot tow rope and began to "track" their craft up against the stream. It was heart-breaking work. Frequently they were waist deep in the cold water. Long "sweepers" with tips awash in the flood interfered with their efforts. The many branches of the stream forced them to make repeated crossings, for the delta was no more than an endless series of islands through which the current swirled. When dusk overtook them they were wet, weary and weak from hunger. With the dawn they were up and at it again, but their task became constantly more difficult because of the floating glacier ice, which increased with every mile. They were obliged to exercise the extreme caution. Hour after hour they strained against the current until the ropes bit into their aching flesh, bringing raw places out on neck and palm. Hour after hour the ice went churning past, and through it all came the intermittent echo of the caving glaciers ahead of them.

Dan Appleton realized very soon whither the journey was leading, and at thought of actually facing those terrible echoes so large in conjecture his pulses began to leap. He had a suspicion of O'Neil's intent, but

dared not voice it. Though the scheme seemed mad enough, its very audacity fascinated him. It would be worth while to take part in such an undertaking, even if it ended in failure. And somehow, against his judgment, he felt that his leader would find a way.

For the most part O'Neil was as silent as a man of stone, and only on those rare occasions when he craved relief from his thoughts did he encourage Dan to talk. Then he sometimes listened, but more frequently he did not. Slater had long since become a dumb draft animal, senseless to discomfort except in the hour of relaxation, when he monotonously catalogued his ills.

"Are you a married man?" O'Neil inquired once of Dan.

"Not yet, sir."

"Family?"

"Sure! A great big, fine one, consisting of a sister. But she's more than a family—she's a religion." Receiving encouragement from his employer's look of interest, he continued: "We were wiped out by the San Francisco earthquake and stood in the bread line for awhile. We managed to save \$4,000 from the wreck, which we divided equally. Then we started out to make our fortunes. It was her idea."

"You came to Cortez?"

"Yes. Money was so easy for me that I lost all respect for it. The town rang with my mirth for awhile. I was an awful fool."

"Education?"

"Now, it's my ambition to get settled and have her with me. I haven't had a good laugh, a hearty meal or a Christian impulse since I left her."

"What did she do with her half of the fortune?"

"Invested it wisely and want to work. I bought little round celluloid disks with mine; she bought land of some sort with hers. She's a newspaper woman, and the best in the world—or at least the best in Seattle. She wrote that big snowslide story for the Review last fall. She tells 'em how to raise eight babies on \$7 a week or how to make a full set of library furniture out of three beer kegs, a packing case and an epileptic icebox. She runs the 'Domestic Economy' column, and she's the sweetest, the cleverest, the most stunning!"

Appleton's enthusiastic tribute ceased suddenly, for he saw that O'Neil was once more deaf and that his eyes were fixed dreamily upon the canyon far ahead.

On the evening of the sixth day a splintered, battered poling boat with its seams open swung in to the bank where O'Neil's men were encamped, and its three occupants staggered out. They were gaunt and stiff and heavy eyed. Even Tom Slater's full cheeks hung loose and flabby. But the leader was alert and buoyant; his face was calm, his eyes were smiling.

"You'll take the men on to the coal fields and finish the work," he told his boss packer later that night. "Appleton and I will start back to Cortez in the morning. When you have finished go to Juneau and see to the recording."

"Ain't that my luck?" murmured the dyspeptic. "Me for Kyak, where there ain't a store, and my gum all wet."

"Chew it, paper and all," advised Appleton cheerfully.

"Oh, the good has all gone out of it now," Slater explained.

"Meet me in Seattle on the 15th of next month," his employer directed.

The clerk of the leading hotel in Seattle whirled his register about as a man deposited a weather beaten hat bag on the marble floor and leaned over the counter to inquire:

"Is Murray O'Neil here?"

This question had been asked repeatedly within the last two hours, but heretofore by people totally different in appearance from the one who spoke now. The man behind the desk measured the stranger with a suspicious eye before answering. He saw a ragged, loose hung, fat person of melanchoy countenance, who was booted to the knee and chewing gum.

"Mr. O'Neil is not here."

The fat man stared at his informant accusingly. "Ain't this the 15th?" he asked.

"It is."

"Then he's here, all right?"

"Mr. O'Neil is not in," the clerk repeated, gazing fixedly over Mr. Slater's left shoulder.

"Well, I guess his room will do for me. I ain't particular."

"His room is occupied at present. If you care to wait you will find—"

Precisely what it was that he was to find Tom never learned, for at that moment the breath was driven out of his lungs by a tremendous whack, and he turned to behold Dr. Stanley Gray towering over him, an expansive smile upon his face.

"He's around somewhere."

Slater turned a resentful, smoldering gaze upon the hotel clerk and looked about him for a chair with a detachable leg, but the object of his regard disappeared abruptly behind the key rack.

"This rat brain'd party said he hadn't come."

"He arrived this morning, but we've barely seen him."

"I left Appleton in Juneau. He'll be down on the next boat."

"Appleton? Who's he?" Dr. Gray inquired.

"Oh, he's a new member of the order—initiated last month. He's learning to be a sleep hunter, like the rest of us. He's recording the right of way."

"What's in the air? None of us knows. We didn't even know Murray's whereabouts. Thought he was in New York. The other boys have quit their jobs, and I've sold my practice."

"It's a railroad!"

Dr. Gray grinned. "Well, that's the tone I use when I break the news that it's a girl instead of a boy."

"It's a railroad," Slater repeated, "up the Salmon river!"

(Continued next week)

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